

Opinion

Which way african culture? that's the question*

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Listen Ocol, you are the son of a Chief,
 Leave foolish behaviour to little children,
 It is not right that you should be laughed at in a song!
 Songs about you should be songs of praise!

(Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* 1966, p.14)

If there are any of us who have not yet read Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, then all I can say is that you missed one of the most significant trips to Africa's Cultural Emancipation.

When I was an undergraduate student at Makerere University (Uganda) between 1972 – 1975, Okot p, Bitek was one of the prominent scholars whose ideas on literature, education, society and culture meaningfully occupied our searching minds. Through his works of art, and many others by other African writers, we were able to deeply appreciate the inter-relationship between literature, history, philosophy, religion and culture in a broad context.

This paper therefore seeks to revisit some of the pertinent issues that have an immediate bearing on our contemporary lives as Africans.

I wish to begin by a fairly brief discussion of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* as a way of contextualizing the title of my paper . I am deliberately doing this as a demonstration of the very crucial role that literature, as a subject and as a discipline, has played in cultural awareness and cultural identity within our own African situation.

Using local imagery and idioms, *Lawino* (the voice of the peasantry) varies her tone between ridicule and sympathy in order to give concrete shape to the cultural theme.

There is a sense in which *Song of Lawino*, on a thematic level, forms part of the historical chain of works which had their inspiration from negritude. By this philosophy

the African traditional cultures were seen as the only hope of salvation for a continent which had been trampled upon by colonialism and, consequently, by the white man's cultural values. Okot p' Bitek's attitude to the cultural conflict resulting out of the Western and African contact is therefore similar to Aime Cesaire's or Leopold Sedar Senghor's, for example, who were the main exponents of negritude.

The argument here is that Ocol, Lawino's husband as portrayed in the text cited above, pours scorn on black people because he is in love with Clementine, the woman who represents the Western cultural values. It is these values which the African elite embrace with deep passion. The end result is some kind of cultural rootlessness.

Lawino is making a valid observation especially as it relates to the period immediately after independence. I must admit that our own cultural position, as Africans, has become a typical example of alienation particularly among the privileged classes. Undoubtedly, this alienation (in a real cultural sense) is an ailment which needs curative attention. Lawino's lament in *Song of Lawino* is an honest plea:

Listen Ocol, my old friend,
The ways of your ancestors
Are good,
Their customs are solid
And not hollow
They are not thin, not easily breakable
They cannot be blown away
By the winds
Because their roots reach deep into the soil.(p.29)

May I include Okot p' Bikek's *Song of Ocol* under this section. Ocol's attitude to Lawino, and symbolically to his people, exposes him as a negative element in society. He shows a lack of confidence in his own origins and even goes further to portray Africa as an idle giant unable to act in any purposeful direction (p'Bitek 1970: 19-22). It should be noted that this is not a correct view of Africa. One can argue that Ocol's view of Africa is the view of a man who has failed to inspire, to guide and to lead a people into determining their own destiny. Even Ocol's vision of modern culture in some kind of nationalistic setting is equally unrealistic:

I see an old homestead
In the valley below
Huts, granaries ...
All in ruins;

I see a large pumpkin
Rotting
A thousand beetles
In it;
We will plough up
All the valley,
Make compost of the pumpkins
And the other native vegetables,
The fence dividing
Family holdings
Will be torn down,
We will uproot
The trees demarcating
The land of clan from clan,

We will obliterate
Tribal boundaries
And throttle native tongues
To dumb death.

(*Song of Ocol*, pp. 16-17)

This is a treacherous proposal because it amounts to agitating for a rather eccentric cultural revolution.

Incidentally, in another text, Okot p' Bitek (1973:5), had the following to say: "The youths of Africa, like youths anywhere in the world, usually emulate their elders. 'Apemanship' in high places does not help in eradicating 'apemanship' among the young; it does not encourage creativity among the youths. Let the black man use his creativity and initiative to reconstruct his own society and institutions in his own style!"

The challenge seems to have been squarely rested on our shoulders and at our feet: Let we, Africans, use our creativity and initiative to reconstruct our own society and institutions in our own style. This is not an easy challenge because it requires us to take into account several factors as follows:

Definition of culture

Many of us take 'culture' to simply refer to how a given group of people behave in a

given situation or within their respective community. Ironically, in this myopic definition, we tend to highlight what we consider to be 'absurd' forms of behaviour – 'absurd' in relation to our own individualistic preferences.

But we sincerely need to get ourselves into a broad perspective. For example, E.B. Taylor (1871:1) defined culture as: that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society

Lest the Beijing group vents their frustration on me, 'man' was being used here in a very general sense and in any case at a time when no individual had become hyper-gender-sensitive.

Anyhow, the above definition throws some light on areas which we hardly think about in those terms: knowledge and law. Quite often we seem to imagine that any talk about beliefs and customs is exhaustive enough.

Ralph Linton (1945:42) offered a definition of culture which stressed the factor of integration: "A culture is the configuration of learned behaviour and results of behaviour whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the member of a particular society".

'Configuration' here simply refers to the systematic arrangement of the various parts or components of a given culture in a given community. The emphasis here seems to be on 'learned behaviour' with regard to language use, rites of passage, various beliefs and taboos, and the different roles to be played by the members of a given community. There is also the practice of 'sharing' and 'transmitting' – a clear indication that no one aspect of culture can ever be a preserve of a single individual. The terms therefore evoke the sense of communality. Victor Barnouw (1973:6) defined culture as: "the way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all of the more or less stereotyped pattern of learned behaviour which are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation."

In a number of ways, Barnouw's definition of culture is similar to Ralph Linton's – particularly with regard to the use of the word 'configuration' and the idea of 'handing down from one generation to the next.' The only difference is that, in the latter case, we are at least told how the transmission of various cultural aspects takes place – through 'language and imitation.' However, the use of the adjective 'stereotyped' to

refer to patterns of learned behaviour is highly objectionable because it implies a negative connotation.

In my view, 'stereotyped patterns of learned behaviour' could possibly refer to any one of the following: the bell-bottom trousers of the rock-and-roll age that hit Kenya and most part of Africa in the 1960s and 1970s; the use of *AMBI* or other forms of skin-lightening cosmetics in order that a black-skinned African woman acquires some fair complexion; the 'burning' of African hair in order that it acquires some degree of flexibility like that of a white woman. In all these cases, the so-called 'modern' African was trying to imitate aspects of Western culture. And the imitations were so random and so blind that one could hardly refer to them as patterns of learned behaviour. Sometimes the Western movies (either on television or film screens) have tended to create strange instincts in the African youth. For example, any estate in the Eastlands of Nairobi or any street in the city will immediately reveal a whole range of hair-cut styles and all manner of dressing. Would anybody be right to consider these weird examples as part of the Kenyan culture?

Functions of culture

Apart from defining what culture is, we also need to know its basic functions in any given society. A re-examination of the various definitions we have so far assembled will clearly indicate that there is the element of integration wherever an established culture is involved. In other words, culture is a significant unifying factor. It provides the law and the morals which create a code of conduct to which all the members of a community are expected to adhere. Culture is the basis for the existence of an organic unit in which a high degree of cohesion is always anticipated. The concept of a 'society' or a 'community' directly indicates the presence of a social order. An established culture therefore creates a sense of organization in terms of division of labour, social structures, forms of initiation and informal education. Above all, as Barnouw, (1973:7) points out:

the culture of a society provides a number of ready-made answers to the problems of life. The child learns these as he grows up and comes to see the world through the particular spectacles of his culture. The culture provides him with means for coping with the world; mastery of these methods increases his sense of confidence. The culture also has a body of doctrines about the world – religious traditions and folklore – which give some orientation and reassurance to the individual.

Let us critically evaluate the above quotation. If an individual is, for example, thinking about marriage within a traditional context, his/her culture will already have set out the procedures to be followed. In other words, his/her culture has inherent solutions to any issues or problems relating to marriage. Other barometers can be applied to other areas of conflict in an individual's life.

What is most important here is that the culture provides the learning environment for the child. Hence our emphasis on informal education. Within this learning environment, a child acquires the capacity to adapt himself/herself to a number of demanding situations. In the course of time, he/she is able to develop a dependable world-view as confidently as possible depending on the kind of up-bringing he/she has received.

But we should not just see the functions of culture from this positive angle. It would not be in the interest of any efforts towards a cultural policy to assume that everything about culture is widely accepted as ideal. For example, a (given) culture may also provide threatening influences such as beliefs in evil spirits, malevolent gods, sorcery, (and so on) which may structure a view of the world as dangerous (Barnouw, 1973:7).

However, this too has its important role to play. The awareness of the above forms of culture keeps the individual in check and ensures that law and order are maintained. There is certainly a very strong dimension to this. For example, in some communities in Africa, respect for elders must be upheld at all times. Or else the gods are invoked to tragically punish the offending individual. A parent (particularly a mother) could even strip before her wayward son and it is generally believed that such an action has very drastic consequences. We have also to consider the respective tradition in which this takes place. Maybe this is why the stripping by some women at Uhuru Park (Nairobi) in 1991 didn't have may tangible effect because it lacked a recognizable cultural base!

The sense of history

Members of a given society or community need to understand their own history. They need to understand their origins, the various challenges they have had to face across time, the changes that may have taken place within their cultural patterns, and even the kind of future they envisage vis-a-vis their past and present.

In our own privileged position as the elite in Africa, a working knowledge of anthropology is necessary. Anthropology is simply the study of human beings as creatures of

society. It seeks to account for the differences between various communities, not from a prejudicial point of view but from a very panoramic and objective stand point. In other words,

An anthropologist's object is to understand the way in which respective cultures change and differentiate, the different forms through which they express themselves, and the manner in which the customs of any peoples function in the lives of the individuals who compose them (Benedict 1935:1).

I am laying emphasis on 'a working knowledge of anthropology' because I am aware that we cannot all become social or cultural anthropologists.

All that we must bear in mind is that the customs into which we are born and brought up determine who we are in our adulthood. The question that usually arises is: do we, as African people, have a cultural identity as the Hindus in India or as the Japanese? Obviously, one other question we must pose is: in what ways has Africa's multi-ethnicity affected our cultural identity as black people? This is the point at which our deep sense of history must be called upon so that we make a critical evaluation of our pre-colonial and our post-colonial eras.

Defining personality

I believe that in as much as we may want to establish the very close inter-relationship between culture and history, we must bear in mind that societies consist of individuals. And that each individual can be seen in terms of 'a personality.' Let us again attempt a definition of this word which has its beginnings in the Greek word *persona*, meaning 'mask'. Morton Prince (1929:532) saw 'personality' as the sum-total of all the biological innate dispositions, impulses, tendencies, appetites, and instincts of the individual, and the acquired dispositions and tendencies – acquired by experience.

This is quite a broad definition and it is open to many interpretations. When what is at stake is not only the principle but also the practice of nationhood in a multi-cultural context, there must be checks and balances for individual "impulses, tendencies and appetites." How accommodating, for example, is an inherently moody or violent person? How tolerable is an individual who has overwhelming 'grabbing' instincts in terms of personal accumulation of materials wealth? How about the tendencies of mugging or violent robbery, particularly when it is on the increase as recent cases indicate? Can we still talk of 'personality' even when the examples we have are those who upset society's equilibrium? Is there hope that a well-formulated cultural policy can

bring about a change of heart in such individuals?

Gordon Allport (1937:48) defined 'personality' as: "the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment."

Reference is here being made to an individual's psychological set-up and his physical environment. If we are to talk of a 'cultured' citizen of Africa, for example, the assumption would be that such a person is well-behaved. It would mean that he/she had the psychological preparedness to imbibe his/her culture and the capacity for meaningful 'adjustments to his environment'. This is a crucial point because of recent events in Africa. There are tribes which have simply refused to recognize the existence of others. There are individuals who even fail to tolerate you at your joint place of work because you don't belong to their tribe. There are critical national issues which have tended to be settled not by a strong, national political will but along tribal lines. All of a sudden, egocentricity and ethnicity have been fronted at the expense of true nationhood. And yet for any cultural policy to succeed in a situation such as ours, there must be a deliberate and purposeful, "dynamic organization" within the individual. There must be a self-evaluation through which an individual recognizes himself/herself as a link in the chain of nation-building. That is when we can rightfully talk of African Personalities and even 'The African Character.'

According to Victor Barnouw (1973:10), "personality is a more or less enduring organization of forces within the individual associated with a complex of fairly consistent attitudes, values, and modes of perception which account, in part, for the individual's consistency of behaviour." This is what we really need in our efforts to instill a sense of Africanism in the young generations. If we must act as role models, as is naturally expected of us, then we must display "an enduring organization of forces" within each one of us for the common good. And there should be no debate about the urgent need for "the individual's consistency of behaviour" as clearly stated above. Yet, in most cases, we have witnessed a lot of inconsistency in behaviour, in attitude, in utterances, in project implementation, in nearly all aspects of public life. This has led those of us who think critically about 'systems' to question the credibility of the 'Personalities' involved. Or do we go back to the meaning of *persona* which refers to a 'a mask' within the historical Greek context? In which case we 'mask' our cultures just as much as we 'mask' our personalities and, therefore, one would be justified to accuse us of being zombies.

The school of curriculum

In trying to achieve some kind of “an African culture” or even in trying to apportion respect to Africa’s various ethnic communities, there is no doubt that the school curriculum has a big part to play. We have already indicated the significance of cultural awareness and cultural identity. I therefore see language, literature, drama, music, dance and history as very crucial components of the school curriculum.

To just take the example of literature alone, we should see it as an effective means of fostering and re-creating a people’s culture. Hence, the need for a highly functional syllabus which contextualizes students within their immediate environment. In other words, the teaching of literature in African schools and colleges can make sense only if it is deliberately made relevant in social and cultural terms. And even in political terms. I have often wondered why censorship has ever been used and yet our very lives and, consequently, our own very cultures are a whole political dimension of this very world we inhabit? Jesus Christ Himself let his disciples engage him in some political – sensitive questions. And whenever He rebuked anyone, it was as a corrective measure and not a punitive measure. Why has censorship therefore, in some African countries, been used as an instrument to suppress our literary creativity and, in an indirect way, our cultural expression?

I hope some day I will find a sensible answer to the above question because:

- (a) Literature (whether written or oral) plays a significant part in our lives within our own communities or in relation to other communities.
- (b) Literature (particularly in traditional African contexts) plays an important role in cultural transmission.
- (c) Literature is a useful resource for language teaching and, consequently, for self-expression.
- (d) Literature is a means for developing an individual’s critical thinking.

The 1974 Conference on “The Teaching of African Literature in Kenyan Schools”, held in September at Nairobi School, marked the first official attempt to place literature in an African cultural context. Some of its terms for reference, for example, were:

- (a) Oral Literature ought to be central in any literature curriculum; and
- (b) a clear programme of Swahili literature should be introduced and be made compulsory in schools because Kiswahili (as a national language) has a major role to play in Kenya.

The expression ‘oral literature’, in (a) above, strictly refers to the art of words in any

society, transmitted orally and having a cultural bearing on that particular society. But the term can also be extended to include all the aspects of a people's way of life – for example, their beliefs, their customs, their taboos, their traditional forms of worship, their sculpture and painting (if any), their political and economic organizations. These are some of the cultural values which African students should understand about themselves in relation to their respective ethnic communities. The term “folklore” is preferred because it covers all the above items.

With regard to point (b) above, there is no doubt that Kiswahili provides the most appropriate medium for widespread communication in the Eastern African situation. Moreover, in one of his major critical writings, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972:19) argues:

Our activities should not be aimed at enhancing reactionary traditionalism, irrelevant tribal solidarity, or elitism. After all, traditional tribal or ethnic unities are irrelevant and reactionary now that the economic bases on which they rested have been removed.

Ngugi's criticism of 'tribal or ethnic unities', in the above context, reinforces the main points in one of his essays: "Towards a National Culture".

I now find it very difficult to reconcile this social vision with the position that Ngugi later on takes in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) in which he now sees the language issue in Africa from a totally different angle. What is, however, clear is that Ngugi's (1986: xix) decision to write in Gikuyu has meant that he remains accountable to his Kikuyu tribe at the expense of promoting Kenyan National Literature. In fact there has been need to translate into English or Kiswahili some of the works that have been written in Kenyan vernacular languages. This is just one case known to the writer of this article. There may be other similar cases elsewhere in Africa.

Let me not be misunderstood here. I am not opposed to people writing in their vernacular languages, if this constitutes an individual's more effective way of self-expression. But I get disturbed by scholars who at one stage endorse a national language policy and at another stage they vehemently defend 'isolationism' or *majimboism*. I am against scholars who are quick to refer us to the American, the British, the Russian and Japanese examples of literary creativity and the sense of democracy and at the same time frustrate our efforts to overcome our ethnic barriers in order to achieve some kind of "national character."

Prejudices

Prejudices, of any kind – be they racial, tribal, class, elitist, or based on religion or sex – , are perhaps the biggest obstacles in any human or national development. We are told, for example,

Prejudice has a long history in the United States, despite the (noble) traditions of democracy and christianity. Racial segregation and ideology of racial superiority have been part of the American culture for generations and in some sense every white American is implicated in this aspect of American life. White racial prejudice antedated the slave trade; perhaps without such prejudice, the slave trade would never have been allowed to expand (Barnouw 1973:73).

In the context of the above quotation, one would be justified to also relate to the African situation. During the colonial period in Africa, we were segregated on racial grounds. The whites thought of themselves as the superior race – some of them still think so actually – and they coerced every non-white around them into believing that. They even deployed their colonial education system as a means of making us prejudicial against our own cultures.

In this post-colonial era, we have witnessed the emergence of other forms of prejudices particularly along class and tribal lines. I want to imagine that it is hatred of the rich for the poor – or the hatred of the privileged for the less privileged – which has now resulted into open class antagonism. It is also the reality that the tribal clashes in Africa are usually out of ethnic prejudices or tribal chauvinism with perhaps some tribes feeling superior over the others.

Transport and communications

It is evident that with improved means of transport and communication, the various ethnic groups can no longer remain in isolation. Several migrations have not only taken place across history but there are regular inter-tribal and inter-regional movements taking place. We must never lose sight of the cultural influences that arise from such informal interactions. Hence the significance of the following point:

Cultural borrowing

I am sure that none of us is ever under the illusion that societies are static. I say this because some of us have violently defended our tribes as if this was the case. In such unfortunate cases, it has never occurred to the perpetrators of tribal violence that societies are fundamentally dynamic and therefore social and cultural changes are inevitable.

Some of these changes may voluntarily and perhaps unconsciously take place from within during the process of cultural adjustments in a given community. Some of them may be due to external influences.

However, what is really crucial here is that every tribe or every nation must undertake selective cultural borrowing in keeping with contemporary times. In terms of culture, Africa has tended to borrow in a wholesale manner from the Western world. This may have been the case during the colonial period because of the kind of colonial power and colonial education that we were subjected to. But the trend ought to have been revolutionized soon after our respective independences. Selective cultural borrowing is what we must adopt. Taking only that which is useful to us and doing everything possible to preserve that which gives us our credibility as independent Africans.

Mass media

Those of us who are sensitive enough to current issues, can vividly remember the part that some Kenyan newspapers, for example, played in fanning tribal clashes. Sides had already been taken and everything possible was being done to instill fear into the Kenyan population. Such propagandist standpoint can never be useful in any national endeavour to achieve stability.

The point is that newspapers have a big role to play in all aspects of our contemporary lives. The television and the film industry too have an even bigger role to play, particularly with regard to the cultural awareness of the African youth. Quite often our own cultural heritage has been sidelined at the expense of Western-oriented programmes. But we are not lost to the fact that some of the mass media are still controlled from Western capitals.

Informal education

Perhaps we ought to have started with this very significant aspect of our traditional lives. Formal education is a modern concept and practice. It refers to a school environment where the main objective is literacy – the means by which one can read and write. It also leads to more advanced areas of learning, but in the literate sense.

In the case of informal education, the 'school' environment is basically the family unit, whether one is talking about it in the nucleus or in the extended sense. The home environment provides a wide range of opportunities to learn more about life.

Through informal education, a child acquires the mother's language – what we generally refer to as 'the mother-tongue'. Or the child could acquire any other language that is commonly spoken in the home.

Through informal education, a child acquires the habits about hygiene and general good behaviour. The child is gradually introduced to his/her expected roles in society and there is never any conflict, within that traditional setting, as to what the girls and the boys should respectively do.

Through informal education, various aspects of a given culture are transmitted to the young generation. These include customs, beliefs, taboos, moral values, and the graduation into adulthood through certain types of initiation. All these comprise a systematic cultural training which goes back to time immemorial and which is supposed to ensure the continuity of a given ethnic group and its sense of communality.

Therefore, in trying to answer the question '*Which way African Culture?*', we cannot definitely overlook the role that informal education plays in the proper upbringing of a country's citizens.

We have talked so much about the ills that colonialism committed against the African people. We have condemned the whiteman numerous times for his having disfigured our traditional cultural patterns during the colonial period. Yet the irony is that, in our national policies, we continue to overemphasize Formal Education at the expense of its counterpart: the Informal Education. Let us be logical here: who should be held responsible for juvenile delinquents, for example? The home environment or the school environment? I think the best course for us is to seriously recognize the complementarity between the home and the school environments so that we can at least talk of a 'cultured' nation.

In way of concluding, I wish to submit that all the factors I have raised are not in themselves exhaustive. There is, for example, the level of economic advancement to consider. Even scientific and technological dimensions are crucial factors to consider in our discussions of cultural development.

There is also the work of social psychologists and sociologists and even criminologists which we must take into account. There is the work of oral historians and oral artists which should refresh our minds about our origins and our respective cultural identities. There are the works of composers and singers to sensitize us about various events in

our African societies. We should include here the significant works of our African playwrights/dramatists, poets, novelists and short-story writers. And, of course, other artists such as painters, wood-carvers, sculptors and designers.

There is the cultural repertoire of the African people in the various countrysides upon whom we must depend in our attempts to redefine ourselves. There is history itself to provide indicators of social and cultural changes in various parts of the world so that we can find a most convenient bearing upon this journey into the future as Africans.

There is the crucial role of educationists who must provide social visions that create meaning in the lives of the African youth. There are our elders who surely must be consulted because there may be a lot to learn from their wisdom. There is the work of researchers which must be included so that we have a true record of the cultural changes that have taken place and which then become part of our African heritage.

Above all, there are the politicians and the executive policy-makers who possibly double as the policy-implementers. In all sincerity, there must be a strong will, honesty and a sense of commitment on the part of our political leaders.

Any talk of *Africa's Cultural Revolution* – to use Okot p'Bitek's book title – implies a corporate activity. The activity is likely to involve a wide range of individuals with various inputs but they must all work as a team, regardless of the level at which they come in. "Cultural identity" is one of the many crucial issues that African nations need to address.

This is why I wish to share the following lines with my fellow African people:

Let us move slowly and gently
towards the centres of our nations
holding firmly the hands of the youth
as they walk along in our strides.
We must build shrines,
not mournful shrines of tears
but symbols of our common dreams
and pedestals of inspired nationhoods

So come with me,
noble sons and daughters of Africa.
The rest of the world should listen
To our songs of praise and pride.
(Kisa Amateshe)

Note

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